Right Now

well as offering vast potential for disruption by spoofing and denial-of-service attacks. “A secure Internet voting system is theoretically possible,” wrote cryptographer Bruce Schneier, founder of Counterpane Internet Security, “but it would be the first secure networked application ever created in the history of computers.”

Mercuri worries, too, about the expanded scale of potential abuses. “Whereas earlier technologies required that election fraud be perpetrated at one polling place or machine at a time,” she wrote in her IEEE Spectrum piece, “the proliferation of similarly programmed e-voting systems invites opportunities for large-scale manipulation of elections.” She closed with a comment from an un-named observer of voting technology: “If you think technology can solve our voting problems, he said, ‘then you don’t understand the problems and you don’t understand the technology.’”

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JOIN AND DIVIDE

Anti-social Societies

IN THE MID 1800S, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked on and celebrated the multitude of social organizations that dotted the American landscape. By the end of that century, the Masons, Knights of Labor, Knights of Columbus, Lions Club, Orangemen, and dozens of similar “secret societies” formed the civic backbone of many an American community. What exactly that legacy means is still an open question.

In his seminal 2000 book, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, Malkin professor of public policy Robert Putnam argued that the steady decline of such groups and the dwindling membership in clubs such as bowling leagues represented a dangerous fragmentation of American society that threatened to undermine our civic consciousness. Now, in a new book, Loeb associate professor of the social sciences Jason Kaufman argues that neo-Tocquevillians like Putnam have it almost exactly backwards: the golden age of fraternity is, in fact, responsible for lingering societal problems and divisions, and the decline of such groups heralds a more equal society today.

Kaufman’s book, For the Common Good? American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity (Oxford), attempts to refute the upbeat portrayal of such civic groups by delving deeper to study what organizations people joined, not just whether they did so. By combing through city directories covering the decades before and after 1900 for 53 major American cities, the sociologist has found data suggesting that the “nation of joiners” was originally built from our differences. “This period in American history was unique not because Americans suddenly turned to one another for faith and succor,” he writes, “but because faith and succor were suddenly turned into matters of organizational self-segregation.” “It’s not just that everyone was a Mason,” Kaufman explains. “There’s a thousand different flavors. And many of them made explicit reference to religion, ethnicity, or racial characteristics.” For example, the 1900 Boston city directory listed among its 56 different fraternal and sororal organizations six different branches of the Odd Fellows—two for blacks (one integrated, one not), two for women, and two specifically for white men. Thus, although the Odd Fellows overall may have attracted a wide range of people, the specific chapters were segregated by gender and race. Kaufman says such divisions undermined efforts to bridge differences and hindered the advancement of racial minorities and women by excluding them from social networks and initiatives.

Furthermore, the groups’ recruiting practices tended to attract new members who shared the preferences, backgrounds, and social networks of existing members. “[Belonging to such organizations] was very helpful—but only if you could get into them,” Kaufman says.
“They turned into interest groups; they’re not endorsing the commonweal, they’re endorsing what’s good for them.” By uniting members along racial and ethnic lines (rather than through the broader class-consciousness that developed in many European countries), fraternal organizations divided America’s working class. Kaufman argues that the “golden age of fraternity,” a phrase taken from an 1897 article, helped give rise to a tradition of racial prejudice and interethnic hostility, a fear of government, half-hearted attempts at public social services, and even a political system dominated by special-interest groups.

In the generally all-male organizations, people pooled their own resources for mutual assistance that, in many other countries, would have come from the government, thus undermining the need for aggressive, effective public services. Kaufman goes so far as to argue that one cause of today’s health-insurance crisis is the fraternal societies’ campaign against social-welfare insurance a century ago. He points out that many fraternal organizations first came together precisely to offer members such insurance and so viewed government intervention in insurance as “emasculating.” In the 1910s, when the social-insurance debate occurred, as many as one in three American men belonged to a fraternal society, giving the societies formidable influence over legislative debate. (Women were still disfranchised.) Only after the 1920s, as the private insurance industry grew and removed one of the societies’ main attractions, did their power wane significantly.

As American society has broken down barriers separating ethnicities, races, and genders, there has been less need for the social protection such groups once provided, Kaufman contends, offering a different, and more positive, view of why such organizations have been in decline for decades. “One might go so far as to say that the more we become a nation of equals,” he writes, “the less we need to be a nation of joiners.”

—Garrett M. Graff

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